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Joy: Some New Testament Perspectives and Questions

Introduction

Every year in the church’s calendar we read the story of Jesus’ ‘ascension’ in Acts 1. But we also remind ourselves of the much shorter version of the same story which Luke has placed at the end of his gospel (24.50-53). There we find a phrase which has always puzzled me. Jesus, says Luke, was separated from them and carried up into heaven; whereupon they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem ‘with great joy’. This seems, to put it mildly, counter-intuitive. Why would they be so joyful if Jesus has been taken from them? Ought they not to be sorrowful? Might not his departure signal the start of danger, of fear, of the loss of a sense of direction? What is this ‘joy’ which they now have? What is the reason for it – either in the original historical setting, or in Luke’s vision, as he writes these books a few decades later?

This problem, to be sure, is noticed in the New Testament itself. The Fourth Gospel anticipates it in the so-called Farewell Discourses, when Jesus explains that he is going away, and that this will cause his followers great sadness – but that the sadness will be replaced with joy. ‘You have sorrow now; but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and no-one shall take your joy from you.’ (John 16.22) This finds an obvious echo in the resurrection narrative, when Jesus appears in the Upper Room, and ‘they rejoiced when they saw the Lord’ (20.20). And yet in John’s gospel, as well as in Luke, the obvious sense of joy at seeing Jesus alive again after his crucifixion does not seem to get to the heart of the ‘joy’ of which Jesus speaks in the discourses. He speaks of ‘the ruler of this world’ who is ‘coming’, and who is to be ‘overthrown’ (12.31; 14.30), and in that light tells his followers that, though they will have trouble in the world, they are to cheer up, because ‘I have conquered the world’ (16.33). The joy which the disciples have at Jesus’ resurrection, and at the prospect of his ascension (14.28), is therefore not simply the human delight at discovering a dead friend and master to be alive again. John is pointing his readers to a deeper meaning, to do with the world itself. Something is happening – something has happened – as a result of which the world is a different place. That is the ultimate reason for the disciples’ joy, a joy resting on a foundation which, it seems, no trouble or sorrow can shake.

It has been easy in modern western Christianity to characterize this ‘joy’ in terms of human emotions. One might obviously link it either to the ‘romantic’ Christian movements which have reacted against rationalism (a notable example being C. S. Lewis’s famous autobiography, Surprised by Joy), or to the ‘charismatic’ movements which have brought new energy to staid or static mainline churches, both Protestant and Catholic. To be sure, it would be bizarre to think or speak of ‘joy’ while bracketing out the sense of human delight, elation and celebration which for most people is the simple meaning of the word. Yet in the New Testament the ‘joy’ and ‘rejoicing’ which forms such a common theme is capable of overlapping with quite different human emotions. Paul can instruct the Philippians to ‘rejoice always in the Lord’ while at the same time speaking of the possibility, had his friend Epaphroditus died of his illness, that he himself would have had ‘sorrow upon sorrow’ (Philippians 4.4 with 2.27). Something different
from ‘ordinary’ human joy, even exceptional but still ‘ordinary’ joy, seems to be envisaged here, In Philippians, as in Luke and John, it has to do with ‘the Lord’, who for Paul is the risen and ascended Jesus of Philippians 2.9-11 and 3.20-21. I shall return to this.

But if the ‘joy’ to which the New Testament summons its readers is of a different order to that of regular, even exceptional, human experience, it is also different – so it seems to me – from the mood of the Jewish world of the second-temple period. It presents a fresh retrieval of the joy which is a frequent note in Israel’s scriptures. To make this point, we need to look briefly at the theme of joy in the scriptures, and then at the world of the second-temple period.

‘Joy’ in Israel’s Scriptures and Beyond

A quick read through Israel’s scriptures would reveal ‘joy’ as a significant theme with very specific connotations. Sometimes, of course, the reality is present without the word (we must always remind ourselves of the danger of the concordance!): an obvious example is the song of wild delight sung by Miriam and the rest in Exodus 15. It is a celebration of the power and victory of Israel’s God. Something has happened as a result of which a new world has opened up. The thing which has happened is simultaneously an act of ‘judgment’ and an act of ‘rescue’. God has acted to put things right, to put a stop to evil, and to deliver his people from their enslaving enemy. The major festivals, particularly Passover, look back to the same act of judgment and deliverance, and their celebration draws meaning from this original act.

One thinks, in the same way, of David dancing before the Lord as the Philistines are defeated and the Ark is brought into Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5 and 6). The death of Uzzah prompts a brief pause, but then the celebration begins again (6.6-11, 6.12-15). David’s exuberance draws a sneering rebuke from Saul’s daughter (6.16, 20-23), as extravagant celebration often does (compare John 12.1-8!). But the celebration has something of the same flavour as that of Miriam. The enemy has been defeated, a new day is dawning, and Israel’s God is showing his powerful presence.

These celebrations also reveal the robustly physical nature of ‘joy’ in the Hebrew scriptures. Celebration will include music, dancing, food and wine, and the giving of presents to one and all (2 Samuel 6.18-19). All are to share in the celebratory feasts, including orphans, widows and foreigners (Deuteronomy 14.29; 16.11, 14; 26.11). Indeed, right through the Bible the idea of a great feast is one of the central ways in which joy is expressed in a family or community. As we think about biblical joy we are thus lead to think about the reasons for joy and the character of joy. The reasons include a mighty act of God to bring about victory over evil and the rescue of God’s people from its grip. The character of joy includes the vigorous and vibrant celebration of the goodness of the created order, expressed through the activities which signal and symbolize human well-being – eating, drinking, the joy of marriage, music and dancing.

Perhaps the most obvious location of ‘joy’ in the Hebrew (and Aramaic) scriptures is the promise, and then the (partial?) reality of the restoration after the Babylonian exile. We think of the mingled joy and weeping as the second temple was founded (Ezra 3.10-13). Or, with the Psalm: ‘When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Our mouth
was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy . . . The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.’ This note of retrospective joy then turns into a prayer for fresh acts of deliverance: ‘May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy: those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.’ (Psalm 126). This too highlights the close link between national and political fortunes (the main subject of the Psalm) and the agricultural basis of national life, with the latter thus serving both as metaphor and as metonymy for the restoration of Israel’s fortunes.

We find something similar in Isaiah 9: ‘You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder’ (Isaiah 9.3) Here the simile of harvest points on to the new Davidic kingdom of justice and righteousness, in which the animal kingdom will cease from violence and bloodshed (11.1-10). These images are picked up in later portions of the book, as the whole creation celebrates Israel’s return from exile: ‘You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands’ (55.12). In the great coming restoration, Israel’s God himself will be rejoicing (Isaiah 62.5; 65.19; compare Psalm 104.31; Deuteronomy 30.9; Zephaniah 3.17). ‘Do not be grieved,’ say Ezra and Nehemiah to the returning exiles as they hear the Torah, ‘for the joy of the Lord is your strength’ (Nehemiah 8.10). They then copy David, feasting and drinking and sending portions to those who have nothing. The end of Isaiah also provides another classic statement of Exodus-like joy: ‘You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies [lit.: ‘bones’] shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants, and his indignation is against his enemies’ (66.14). The great divine action which produces victory over evil and rescue for God’s people will be a mixture of new covenant (restoration after exile) and new creation (fresh harvests, producing bodily restoration); and both will cause joy. Indeed – though there are many ways of saying the same thing at this point – one could say that the covenantal actions of Israel’s God produce creational results. History and harvest go closely together. God’s actions on behalf of his people will result in the renewal of the good creation. Elements of the latter can serve both as literary metaphors and appropriate celebrations for the former.

All this biblical material remained of course very much in the minds of second-temple Jews. The scriptures, and particularly the Psalms, were the soil in which all later expectations, aspirations, celebrations and lamentations were planted. The great festivals continued to express and reinforce the celebration of God’s powerful deeds in days gone by. But now new elements were added. The ‘return from exile’ was a mixed blessing. Those who had returned to Jerusalem still had a sense of being ‘enslaved’; the full reality promised in Isaiah 40—55 or Ezekiel 36—45 had not come about. Daniel 9, a passage much discussed in the post-Maccabean period, spoke of the exile lasting not for 70 years but for 490. In particular, though the Temple had been rebuilt, there remained a sense that the promise of glorious divine return (Isaiah 40, 52; Ezekiel 43) had not yet happened. It remained in the future (Haggai 2.7; Zechariah 2.4f., 10f.; Malachi 3.1). Indeed, when the Rabbis, much later, discussed the ways in which the second temple was deficient when compared with the first, one of the key elements missing from the second temple was the Shekinah itself (bYom 21b). The joy of geographical return, and of the restoration of cult, was mixed with a sense that something remained incomplete. (We may exempt ben-Sirach from this; there, we do seem to find a grand celebration, with the High Priest in the temple and everything
seeming to be right with the world. But we have good reason to suppose that this priestly and aristocratic perspective was not widely shared.)

What we find in the second-temple period, then, is a rich mixture of celebration and expectation. Joy was still expressed in the traditional ways, and for the traditional reasons – with the added reason of the return itself, such as it was, and then the major new reason of the Maccabean triumph, resulting in the institution of a new feast, Hannukah, and the vivid and evocative joy of the ceremony of the light. But the ambiguities of the post-exilic settlement, and the yet more complicated ambiguities of the post-Maccabean period, meant that the joy itself had an increasingly forward look. The Hasmonean monarchy, the Roman invasion, and the rise of Herod and his family, could not prevent the annual celebrations, the joyful recounting of the kingship of God as expressed in the Psalms and elsewhere. But they ensured that this celebration was inevitably more about hope than about present triumph. The more Daniel 9 was woven into popular consciousness (and this seems to be what Josephus means when he speaks of ‘an oracle in their scriptures’ which drove the people to revolt in the reign of Nero [Jewish War 6.312-315]), the more we must conclude that the dominant note of the second-temple Jewish worldview was not so much joy as hope. A joyful hope, yes, often; but a hope deferred so long, and dashed so repeatedly, that in many texts we find hope in the form of a gritted-teeth determination to hold on at all costs rather than an easy or cheerful celebration of the fact that what God did in the past he would soon do once more. And when we reach the post-70 period, in books like 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, hope itself has been under severe threat. It is still there, a function as always of creational monotheism (if there is one God, then despite all appearances he must eventually act to set things right); but these books have little of the joy of Isaiah 40—55, or Psalms 96, 98 and 126.

This is not, of course, a criticism. One might as well criticize a young widow for failing to sing cheerful songs at the funeral of her wise and loving husband. But it poses a sharp question when we remind ourselves that the first followers of Jesus were speaking, at exactly the same period, of a ‘joy’ which retained the shape and content of the Jewish phenomenon at which we have glanced, but which had sprung to life in a new and unexpected manner.

Joy in the New Testament

Twenty years ago, I conducted a thought-experiment, using the worldview model I had developed in collaboration with others. What would be the defining themes of second-temple Judaism on the one hand and the first two centuries of Christianity on the other? (This study forms the bulk of The New Testament and the People of God [1992].) I came to a conclusion which I had not anticipated. The worldviews are very similar. Both are rooted in the creational monotheism of Israel’s scriptures. Both are passionate about the divine faithfulness to the covenant. Both have a measure of joy, and a measure of hope. But the proportions are radically different. For the second-temple Jews, the dominant note, as I have just said, was hope, albeit backed up by the joyful ancient stories of divine faithfulness. For the early Christians, however, the dominant note was clearly joy, albeit still including an ongoing hope. The reasons for this joy, and the character of this joy, remain recognisably within the ancient Israelite parameters (the celebrations of Exodus, and so forth). But the older picture has been brought into new, sharp and
startling focus by the events concerning Jesus. Whatever explanation one might give of these events – if, for instance, a sceptic were to say that the whole thing was a fabrication based on wish-fulfilment – one still has to give a historical account of what the early Christians themselves would have said, and indeed did say, about the reasons for and the shape of this joy.

The usual word-studies have been done many times, focusing particularly on the roots agalliasis and chara/chairô and their cognates. These are frequently combined (e.g. Matthew 5.12; Luke 1.14; 1 Peter 1.8; 4.13; Revelation 19.7). They occur across the whole range of the New Testament, from the angelic joy (to be shared with ‘all people’) at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2.10-11) through to the joy when the final kingdom is revealed (Revelation 19.6-7). (It is sometimes claimed that there is theological significance in the etymological proximity between chara, ‘joy’ and charis, ‘gift’. There may be a grain of truth in this, but since the New Testament writers do not seem to me to make this link explicit we should be wary of going beyond the usual rule: the meaning of a word is its use in context, not its history or family resemblances.)

In the Gospels, references to ‘joy’ frequently describe the reaction of crowds or individuals at meeting Jesus or experiencing his healing power. But this goes beyond the natural human gladness at healing and hope. There is both a theological and an eschatological dimension to this joy. This comes out most clearly in Luke 15, where Jesus describes ‘joy in heaven’ when a sinner repents – in order to explain why he himself is having a celebration with ‘sinners’. The point is made explicitly in the first two parables of the collection, the ‘lost sheep’ and the ‘lost coin’ (Luke 15.1-10). Then, by strong implication within the narrative itself, the same point is to be understood within the third story, the so-called ‘Prodigal Son’ or ‘Prodigal Father’ (Luke 15.11-32). Here the verb used is euphrainô (four times from vv. 23 to 32), though the parallel with 15.7, 10 indicates that the meaning is to be understood as close to chara there.

The emphasis throughout the chapter is on the appropriateness of celebration, of ‘joy’, as a result of what has happened and is happening in the welcome of (repentant) ‘sinners’ – in other words, as a result of what is happening in the public career of Jesus. And, by implication, as a result of what will happen at its conclusion: ‘this my son’, and then ‘this your brother’, ‘was dead and is alive again’ (15.24, 32). The public career of Jesus, characterized by (among other things) his celebrations with ‘sinners’, will reach its appropriate climax in his death and resurrection, and the whole thing together explains why celebration, ‘joy’ – in the form of feasting, music and dancing (15.25) – is not only appropriate in itself but constitutes a sharing of the joy of heaven, that is, of God himself. This is a moment when heaven and earth come together, as in the Temple. And this theological dimension is matched by the eschatological: the story of the son who is lost and found, dead and alive again, reflects the dominant Jewish story of the period, that of shameful exile and rapturous return. It is the story Jesus’ contemporaries were eager to experience in full at last. It is the story which, in one way and another, Jesus was telling and enacting wherever he went.

The ‘joy’ we see in the gospels is thus not simply the natural human delight in times of healing and reconciliation, though it is that as well. It is the fresh instantiation, in a new (messianic) mode, of the joy expressed in Psalm 126 and elsewhere: the joy of discovering that Israel’s God was at last doing the thing he had promised, rescuing the people from their ‘exile’ and providing forgiveness, restoration and new life. And it is the joy to be experienced in the fresh presence of
God – not now, after all, in a rebuilt temple but in the person and the actions of Jesus – and also the fresh act of God, rescuing people not now from Egypt or Babylon but from death itself.

John’s gospel extends this perspective, and particularly in the ‘farewell discourses’ of chapters 13—17 speaks repeatedly both of Jesus’ own joy and of the disciples’ sharing in that joy (e.g. 14.28; 15.11; 16.20-24; 17.13). This is despite the repeated warnings of suffering to come, of opposition and persecution from ‘the world’: the world will rejoice at Jesus’ demise, but this will be overturned in the events that follow. The context in John indicates that this, too, is not simply the natural human delight at ill fortune suddenly reversed. The whole gospel is about the new creation which comes about through the ‘tabernacling’ presence of the Word of God (1.14): in other words, the new temple, from which living water will flow out, as in Ezekiel (John 7.37-39). As with Luke, the reader is meant to detect the theological reason for joy (the presence, and rescuing action, of Israel’s God) and the eschatological reason (here, the ‘new temple’).

The four gospels thus link their narrative, and with it their theme of joy, to the ancient hope of Israel, to the biblical promises and prospects which, so they claim, are now finding a new and different kind of fulfilment. But the difference between, say, what a second-temple Jew might be hoping for and what a reader of the gospels might be discovering does not consist in the usually-imagined distinction between an earthly hope on the one hand and a ‘spiritual’ hope on the other. Far from it. The reason for the new ‘joy’ is that certain things are happening ‘on earth as in heaven’, The character of the new ‘joy’, like that of the old, is feasting, a celebration of the goodness of the present creation.

In the letters of Paul, ‘joy’ takes second place only to ‘love’, agapē. The fact that these, and seven others, are part of ‘the fruit of the spirit’ (Galatians 5.22-23) does not mean they somehow grow spontaneously without moral or spiritual effort. They are virtues, to be practised. But they are not, of course, self-generated. For Paul the spirit creates the conditions for the new-human characteristics to come to birth. Once again these conditions have to do with the fulfilment of the ancient expectation of Israel, the fulfilment also of the second-temple Jewish hope – though not in the form that had been imagined.

In particular, for Paul ‘joy’ is intimately connected to the resurrection of Jesus on the one hand and to his ascended lordship on the other. This goes wider than mere word-studies. The words for ‘joy’ or ‘rejoicing’ do not occur in Romans 8, but one can hardly read that passage without a sense that what is being expressed is joy of the highest quality. There as elsewhere Paul is drawing on the ancient Exodus-narrative, seeing it as newly accomplished in the events concerning Jesus. (Romans 6: the slaves come through the water to freedom; Romans 7: arriving at Sinai and the problem of Torah’s condemnation; Romans 8: journeying to the ‘inheritance’.) Romans 8 is thus his own fresh equivalent of the song of Miriam, looking at the defeated forces of sin and death and celebrating the divine victory, the revelation of divine covenant faithfulness.

Similar things could be said of the ‘apocalyptic’ passage in 1 Corinthians 15.20-28, in which Paul draws on Psalms 2, 8 and 110 to claim that Jesus is already reigning as Messiah, that he is in the process of completing his victory over all enemies, and that when death itself is finally conquered then this messianic kingdom will give way to the ultimate and final ‘kingdom of God’. This same theme is closely cognate with the passages about Jesus’ victorious lordship in
Philippians 2.6-11 and 3.20-21, and that takes us to the letter which is generally acknowledged as the most explicit Pauline statement of ‘joy’.

Philippians is both an expression of joy and an invitation to joy. This is not because the circumstances, either of Paul himself or of the Philippian church, are comfortable. He is in prison; they are suffering for the gospel. But joy abounds in all directions. Paul prays with joy (1.4). He rejoices in his present imprisonment (1.18). He longs for their progress and joy in the faith (1.25). Their loving unity will make his joy complete (2.2). He rejoices with them and wants them to rejoice with him (2.17, 18). The return of Epaphroditus will bring them joy, so they must receive him with joy (2.28, 29). The central command of the second half of the letter is simply that they should rejoice (3.1; 4.4); the second of these passages, uniquely in Paul, involves a repetition (‘I say it again: “rejoice!”’). The Philippians themselves are his ‘joy and crown’ (4.1), an accolade also awarded to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2.19-20). Paul himself is rejoicing that they have been able to send him practical help (4.10). And these verbal occurrences are simply the tip of the iceberg, signs of the larger theme of the letter as a whole. Philippians is itself a celebration, a sustained declaration of joy in God, joy in the gospel, joy in the Lord, joy despite adverse circumstances, joy expressed in faith and hope and love and, above all, unity.

Again, we enquire as to the reason for, and the character of, this joy. Why was Paul so particularly joyful in writing this letter? And what exactly did he mean by ‘rejoice’ or ‘celebrate’?

At one level the answer is obvious. Paul and the Philippians clearly had a deep bond of mutual affection. What’s more, as the parallel reference in 1 Thessalonians indicates, Paul regarded the churches of northern Greece with particular delight. They were the proof, the seal, the sign that he really was the apostle to the Gentiles, that his work was ‘not in vain’. (Why he saw them thus, with the churches of Turkey already established and the church in Corinth yet to come, is another matter.) But there seems to be something more. I believe it is no coincidence that Philippians, as well as being the most explicit letter when it comes to joy, is also the most explicit when it comes to the sovereign lordship of Jesus, and the way in which allegiance to him works out in the wider social and political landscape. This is not the time for a full exploration of these theme, which, like ‘joy’ itself, permeates much of the letter. But we may at least say this.

The central poem about Jesus in Philippians 2.6-11, now widely recognised to be the theological heart of the letter, has many biblical and theological resonances, but at its centre it is a celebration of the radically different kind of lordship attained, and now exercised, by Jesus. It picks up the larger themes of Isaiah 40—55, in which Israel’s God triumphs over the pagan gods and lords of Babylon and reveals his royal presence in the strangest of ways, through the work of the ‘servant’ (Isaiah 52.7-12 with 52.13—53.12; Isaiah 45.23 is quoted explicitly at Philippians 2.10). The joy which suffuses the whole central section of Isaiah is based on this victorious divine sovereignty, revealed in this way, and Paul encapsulates the same quality through his reworking of these themes with Jesus at their heart.

The specific target is, it seems to me, quite obvious (though this remains controversial and has to be stated with care): Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not. Caesar offers a ‘salvation’, of sorts; the
followers of Jesus have their own kind of ‘salvation’, and must work out, with fear and
trembling, what this will mean in practice (2.12-13). ‘Fear and trembling’, in the Bible, are the
normal reactions to the divine presence, and Paul makes this explicit (2.13). The Jesus-believers
in Philippi lived in a Roman colony where the power and divinity of Rome and the imperial
family were all too present and obvious. Paul wants it to be obvious to them that the power and
divinity of the One God celebrated by Isaiah – and now revealed in the crucified Jesus! – are also
present, and that the ‘salvation’ they provide is the larger and greater reality. This is the source
of, and the reason for, the joy on which he insists.

Paul’s own example provides a microcosmic vision of the same thing. He is in prison, quite
possibly facing death. And the very fact of his being there has meant that the whole imperial
guard have come to hear the ‘gospel’, the royal announcement of Jesus as the crucified and risen
lord of the world (1.12-14). The sovereign lordship of the Messiah frames, and renders joyful,
his reflections on his likely fate (1.18-26). Then, in offering himself as the model of abandoning
privileges in order to be ‘found in him’ (3.9), Paul expresses his joy at ‘the righteousness from
God upon faith’, further defined as ‘to know him and the power of his resurrection and the
fellowship of his sufferings’. This is not simply about personal fulfilment and hope. ‘The power
of his resurrection’ points ahead once more – this is where the strands of the whole letter come
together – to Philippians 3.20-21, where Paul declares that ‘Lord Jesus Messiah’ has the power
to subject all things to himself, and that he will exercise this power in coming from heaven to
transform the present world, and with it the bodies of his people. Unlike those in Philippi
(perhaps including some of the Christians) whose citizenship is in Rome, the true citizenship of
Jesus’ followers is in heaven. This does not mean that Paul is here talking about their ‘going to
heaven’ one day, any more than the Roman citizens in Philippi would expect to go to live in
Rome one day. Rather, they are part of the extended empire of ‘heaven’, and the lord of heaven,
on his return, will make this status complete. (We note that the New Testament never uses the
word ‘heaven’ for ‘the place where God’s people go when they die.’ Paul can speak about this
intermediate state, after bodily death and before bodily resurrection, but he never calls it
‘heaven’; here in Philippians, it simply means being ‘with the Messiah, which is far better’.)

This, I propose, indicates the source of, and the reason for, the ‘joy’ of which Paul speaks. It is
not simply a spiritual exhilaration, though clearly for Paul it includes that. It is certainly not a
sense that though the present world is in bad shape the followers of Jesus will one day leave it
behind and go to a better place entirely. Paul has nothing in common with the joy, such as it is,
of the Gnostic. No: the source of Paul’s joy is that the resurrection andenthronement of Jesus,
his ‘lordship’ over the world, has created a new world, and with it a new worldview. The
followers of Jesus understand that the rule of Caesar, and all other pagan powers, is a mere sham,
a parody of the truth, and that the truth now revealed in Jesus is the truth glimpsed and celebrated
in Isaiah and the Psalms (Paul refers, here as elsewhere, to Psalms 8 and 110). The creator God
has announced the verdict; the world has been put right; the trees in the field will clap their
hands. A new world has been launched, even in the midst of the present old, corrupt and
decaying world. Those who follow Jesus, who are ‘found in the Messiah’, are already part of it.
That is why Paul rejoices, and why he summons the Philippians to rejoice with him. And their
joy must express itself in the unity of the church as a publicly known fact (1.27—2.4, coupled
with 2.12-18).
It would be possible to trace the resonances of this theme through the other Pauline letters. There, as in Philippians, we notice that the usual early-Christian ‘now and not yet’ obtains just as much: ‘not that I have already obtained this, or am already complete’, as he says in Philippians 3.12. But – and this is vitally important – the present ‘not yet’, including suffering, imprisonment and death, is not simply something to be pushed to one side as irrelevant. It too is actually part of the reason for the ‘joy’ of which Paul speaks.

This answers to the famous passage in Romans 5.1-5, where, though the verb kauchaomai does not really mean ‘rejoice’, as in many English translations, the effect is much the same. ‘We boast of our hope of the glory of God’, declares Paul, and then immediately adds ‘we boast in our sufferings, because suffering produces patience, character and hope’. As in Philippians 3.11, so in Romans 8.17-30, which leads to the greatest outburst of joy anywhere in the New Testament (8.31-39), the suffering is part of the hope and hence part of the reason for joy. The suffering of the present time is an indication that the new world and the old are chafing together, and that the followers of Jesus are caught between the two. Paul transposes this into the cosmic context in Romans 8.18-25, interpreting the groaning of all creation as the birth-pangs of the new age. This results not in joy despite suffering, but in joy because of suffering – not in some masochistic sense (Paul is still quite capable of speaking with horror of the pain and anguish he himself has endured, as in 2 Corinthians), but because Paul insists on seeing the suffering in terms of the crucifixion, resurrection and ascended lordship of Jesus.

With this, we have arrived at an answer to the question with which we began. The disciples returned to Jerusalem after the Ascension full of joy because – so the New Testament writers indicate in one way or another – they believed not only that Jesus had been raised from the dead, launching God’s new creation, but that he was now enthroned as the world’s rightful sovereign. ‘Heaven’, where the ascended Jesus now resides and reigns, is not (as in the implicit Epicureanism of so much modern culture!) a long way away from ‘earth’. The two spheres of the good creation are designed to overlap, to interlock, and eventually to be brought together in perfect harmony for ever in the Messiah (Ephesians 1.10). This has now happened proleptically in the person of Jesus himself.

Thus, even though other powers and dominions would still do cruel and terrible things, the divine verdict longed for in the ancient scriptures had been heard, and would be decisive. God had vindicated Jesus after his crucifixion; at his name every knee would bow; and therefore his followers were to ‘rejoice in the Lord always’. In terms of theology and ethics, the virtue of ‘joy’ is inculcated and practised by the celebration of Jesus as the world’s true Lord, who has revealed the true manner of ‘lordship’ in his shameful death, and has thus revealed also the way in which that lordship is presently exercised (i.e. through the humble, mourning, peace-making, justice-seeking character sketched in the Beatitudes). In terms of the history of religions, this vision of ‘joy’ comes straight from Israel’s scriptures with their vision of the triumph of Israel’s God over Pharaoh, over Babylon, over all that corrupts and destroys creation. It is the moment of judgment and rescue spoken of again and again by the Psalms and the prophets. And it confronts the vision of pagan celebration which Paul’s readers knew only too well from the daily life of their towns and cities.
This leads to the second question. If this is the reason for joy, the source of joy, what is the content of that joy? It has been all too easy in the modern western world to suppose that chara and its cognates refer simply to internal mental or emotional states. Certainly they are involved. It would be farcical to imagine a Christian ‘joy’ that was purely outward show. But I think that in Philippians at least Paul envisages a ‘celebration’ which would involve some kind of activity. Granted the traditions which Paul inherited, and his solidly physical understanding of the new creation, including the resurrection body, it is inconceivable that he would have thought of celebrating Jesus’ lordship with a purely mental or emotional happiness, a purely inward sense of well-being. Paul was no hedonist, but as a robust creational monotheist he believed that ‘the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof’ (Psalm 24.1, quoted in 1 Corinthians 10.26), and that food and drink were good and to be enjoyed. Part of the reason for Paul’s anxiety about shared table-fellowship, and shared worship, in Galatians 2 and Romans 14 and 15, was that Christian meals, not least but not only the eucharist, constituted a central part of what he meant by ‘celebrate’, ‘rejoice’. If the word ‘celebration’ has become almost a technical term, certainly in my own church and perhaps elsewhere, for ‘holding a eucharist’, we should guard against that becoming a dead metaphor.

But I wonder – this is impossible to prove, but I wonder – whether Paul also envisaged something more. The ‘celebrations’ of Kyrios Caesar took place in public, as whole towns would be given over to days and seasons of festivals involving processions, music and dancing, feasting and drinking, and ultimately sacrifices and prayers at the relevant shrines. Most ancient religions did this kind of thing. Did Paul want to encourage the Christians to do their own public ‘rejoicing’, perhaps even as a kind of protest? Was their celebration to be only behind closed doors? As I read Philippians 1.27-30 and 4.4-5 I detect at least the possibility that Paul expected the Christians to be known, in public, as people who were celebrating the cosmic lordship of Jesus – with a different kind of celebration, to be sure, in which all people would know their epieikes, which perhaps means ‘restraint’ in contrast to the wild excesses of pagan celebrations. I have argued in chapter 13 of Paul and the Faithfulness of God that in many senses, despite protestant fears, Paul’s communities did have something that could be called a ‘religion’ – remembering that in the ancient world ‘religion’ was something that whole communities did as part of their self-definition. A ‘religio’ in the ancient world was something that bound together and strengthened the polis, the local civic community, through the worship of the local gods. For Paul, there were communal and personal activities which bound together the community of Jesus-followers in worship, united with one another and with the creator God who had made himself known afresh, and decisively, through the gospel. And my suggestion – or at least my question – is whether perhaps ‘joy’, chara, in Philippians and elsewhere, might include this outward, and perhaps public, expression of ‘eschatological religion’.

There is no space to pursue the issues raised by ‘joy’ in other NT documents. I note simply a few highlights. The Johannine correspondence speaks of the joy that comes from the mutual relationship of writer and readers (1 John 1.4; 2 John 4, 10, 11, 12). First Peter expresses, even more strongly than Paul, the exuberant and unrestrained celebration of joy at believing in the Jesus whose own sufferings have paved the way for those of his followers, transforming them from meaningless agony into the testing of faith and so into the glorious hope (1 Peter 1.6-9). This corresponds, of course, to scenes in Acts and elsewhere, where persecution is hailed and
celebrated as a sign that the believers really are the Messiah’s people, really are on the right track (Acts 5.41).

Conclusions

I have concentrated on one or two passages rather than attempting to give a full New Testament picture. As I have hinted, and as is the case with many other themes, a topic may be present even when the two or three key words are not; but I have here focused on passages in which ‘joy’ is an explicit theme. My basic argument has been that the puzzles we might notice – why do the disciples rejoice when Jesus is taken from them? How can they speak of ‘joy’ when so much is still so wrong with their lives, with the world and its wicked rulers, and so on? – can find answers when we consider how the whole early Christian worldview actually functions. In the place of the dominant note of ‘hope’ which we find in second-temple Judaism, rooted as that was in creational and covenantal monotheism when facing the horrors and perplexities of life under the Romans, we find the dominant note of ‘joy’, from within the same basic Jewish worldview, and rooted in the same scriptures, but brought into a startling new focus because of Jesus. I have suggested that in the key passages we see the early Christian belief that in Jesus there had come about a new union between heaven and earth, with the celebrations of the one spilling over necessarily into the celebrations of the other. I have pointed out that ‘celebrations’, within creational monotheism, would naturally involve food and drink, music and dancing and the other accoutrements of ‘joy’ as expressed outwardly and publically. (It was after all the public nature of Jesus’ celebrations that caused the angry questions to which Luke 15 was the answer.) And I have suggested that both in the gospels and in the epistles we can trace a link between the sovereignty, the ‘lordship’, of Jesus and the exhortation to, or expression of, ‘joy’. The fact of the resurrection and exaltation of the crucified Jesus opens up a new world, launches the new creation, over which Jesus himself is sovereign; that is the root cause of joy. The manner of his coming to that sovereignty – his suffering and shameful death – indicates that when we say ‘Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not’, we are not (as some anxiously suppose) replacing one oppressive or totalising system with another. Rather, ‘lordship’ itself is transformed into the picture we see in the Beatitudes, or in Mark 10.35-45, or of course supremely in Philippians 2.1-18. In other words – and in terms of our earlier discussion of scriptural antecedents – something has happened in which the divine judgment on evil, and the divine rescue of the world from its grip, has been unveiled. This is the new Exodus, the new ‘return from exile’. Yes, the ‘second coming’ is still to take place. But modern exegesis, reflecting a reticence or outright denial concerning the bodily resurrection and ascension, has put far too much weight instead on the early Christian hope as the reason for joy. Jesus’ first followers did indeed celebrate what was still to come. But they did so because of the physical, creation-renewing events which had already taken place.

Where does this leave contemporary discussions of ‘joy’? As with many themes in early Christian thought and life, we see both significant continuities and significant discontinuities. Joy and celebration, within a creational and new-creational monotheism, involve not some super-spiritual other-worldly pleasure, but the elements of creation itself caught up in new expressions of new creation. This is the birth of sacramental theology within Christianity. Precisely because the early Christians believed, with a faith rooted in Israel’s scriptures, that in Jesus they had
discerned the human face of Israel’s God, the world’s creator, their celebrations were bound to express significant continuity both with any and all human celebrations and with the Jewish festivals in particular. Hence the way in which Christian baptism celebrates a new kind of Exodus, and the eucharist a new kind of Passover.

But at the same time there are radical discontinuities. The Jewish celebrations of the second-temple period, though rooted in the joy of Exodus 15 and the rest, look on to the future with increasing, and ultimately disappointed, urgency. The disasters of 70 and 135 changed the Jewish world for ever. Joy remains within Jewish festivals and Torah-study, but it may appear to be shorn of its historical and political elements.

Equally, the pagan celebrations of cult and empire were rooted in a different worldview, a different sort of power, and resulted in a different kind of ‘joy’. That is a study worth undertaking in itself. The early Christian celebrations were a reaffirmation of an essentially Jewish vision of the world, over against that pagan vision. They were not an optional extra for the communities generated by the gospel. Not to celebrate, not to express joy in the lordship of the crucified and risen Jesus, would be tacitly to acknowledge that one did not really believe. The human joy of food and drink, of family and civic life, were taken up and transformed, with many paradoxes along the way, into the Jesus-believing joy of eucharist and united fellowship. The deep Jewish roots of early Christian joy enable the church’s celebrations to confront the world dominated by Caesar with the news of a different empire, a different kind of empire. Like love, peace and the other aspects of the Spirit’s fruit, joy may be difficult to maintain. But for the early Christians nothing could take it away. It was, after all, Jesus’ own gift to his people, on the night he was betrayed (John 16.20). The many betrayals that Jesus’ followers will then face, both personal, political, global and cosmic, cannot ultimately destroy, but will only further contextualize, that joy.